

A TERATOLOGICAL SOURCE OF HELLHEAD

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Summary¹

A group of 16th and 17th century Russian icons of the *Resurrection and Descent into Hell* have an interesting depiction of Hell. It is a creature with a face that is human-like but with an opening on the top of its head from which the righteous exit Hell. We call this creature “Hellhead.” We have found what we think is the source for this creature in a medieval Russian novel about Alexander the Great, called *Александрия* [Aleksandriya].

Here are three examples of Hellhead in icons in the collection of the Museum of Russian Icons² (Figures 1-3).

Detail of Hellhead
(left to right):

Figure 1. *Resurrection and Descent*, circa 1650.
MRI #2011.90

Figure 2. *Descent*, late 17th
century. MRI #2012.49

Figure 3. *Resurrection and Descent*, circa 1580.
MRI #2001.4



Introduction

Demons appear mainly in five icon types:

- Resurrection and Descent into Hell,
- The Last Judgment,
- Saint John Climacus and the Ladder of Divine Ascent,
- Icons of warrior saints such as Saints George and Nikita, and
- In kleyma (border scenes) in vita icons.

1 An earlier version of this paper was presented at the conference of the American Association of Teachers of Slavic and Eastern European Languages, in Boston, in January 2013. We wish to thank the anonymous reviewers of this article for their helpful comments.

2 Throughout, we use the abbreviation MRI for the Museum of Russian Icons.

Figure 4. Detail of *Ladder of Divine Ascent* from the Monastery of Saint Catherine, Mount Sinai

Figure 5. *Saint John Climacus (of the Ladder)*, circa 1650. MRI #R2007.43



Figure 6. Bulgarian icon of the Descent.



Figure 7. Cairene Coptic icon of Saint Marina

Very little research has been done on the representation of demons in icons however. This is understandable since most icons are hagiographic, not demonographic. An exception to this fact is an excellent recent book by Antonov and Mayzul's³. The principal focus of the book is not on panel icons, however, but on illustrations in manuscripts. Although there are similarities between the two media, they are different—for example, panel texts can allow for much larger, more detailed images and, therefore, can represent much larger narratives—and their functions are different. Consequently so is the iconography.

There is not much said about how to paint demons in icon painting manuals. Dionysius of Fournia (circa 1670-1745/6), for example, in his *Painter's Manual*⁴ nowhere elaborates on the depiction of 'demon.' Only when commenting on the Book of Revelation does he quote the Bible for a teratological description: "before her a red dragon with seven heads and ten horns and wearing seven crowns." and later "I beheld another beast coming up out of the earth; and he had two horns like a lamb." Similarly, Boris Uspensky in his *Semiotics of the Icon*⁵ mentions demons only in a footnote dealing with devils painted in profile.

The prototypical demon in pre-15th century Russian icons is typically an anthropomorphic bat with a black body, bat-wings, hooked nose, and tufted hair imitating those in the classic 12th century Byzantine icon of Saint John Climacus' *Ladder of Divine Ascent*

3 Антонов, Дмитрий Игоревич и Михаил Романович Майзульс. 2011. *Демоны и грешники в древнерусской иконографии: Семиотика образа*, [Demony i Greshniki v Drevnerusskoy Ikonografii—Semiotika Obraza, Demons and Sinners in Old Russian Iconography—The Semiotics of the Image] Moscow: Indrik, 2011.

4 *The 'Painter's Manual' of Dionysius of Fournia* translated by Paul Hetherington 1974, reprinted 1996, Torrance, CA: Oakwood Publications.

5 Uspensky, Boris *Semiotics of the Icon*. Lisse: The Peter de Ridder Press, 1976, fn. P. 74. Uspensky has recently expressed interest in the topic, however, by his participation in a recent conference on demons. See Антонов Д. Т. и Христофорова О. Б. *In Umbra: Демонология как семиотическая система. Альманах I*. Москва: Издательский центр Российского государственного гуманитарного университета, 2012, pp. 17-65.



Figure 8. *Resurrection and Descent*, mid-19th century. MRI #2012.55

from Saint Catherine’s Monastery at Mount Sinai⁶ where demons are portrayed as trying to pull monks from the ladder leading to Paradise, so that they fall into Hell (Figure 4). An interpretation of that iconography appears in another MRI icon (Figure 5).

Similarly this form of representation of a demon continued at least into the 18th century as exemplified in a Bulgarian icon of the *Descent* (Figure 6)⁷ and a Cairene Coptic icon of Saint Marina from 1569 AM (Anno Martyrum = 1852 CE) (Figure 7).⁸

Depictions of Hell

The Museum of Russian Icons has acquired an icon of the *Resurrection and Descent into Hell* which portrays demons in a much wider variety of ways (Figure 10, see page 4). In particular, the lower left quadrant of this icon contains a description of Hell that focuses on its portrayal with strikingly different and diverse forms than ‘classic’ demons.

In this icon and other *Descent into Hell*⁹ icons, in both Western and Eastern icons, Hell is typically displayed in the lower left-hand corner and is represented as an open mouth, with or without teeth, usually with one eye, in a sagittal cross-section (Figure 8). And so it is with Western ones, such as the early 15th century miniature of *The Last Judgment*¹⁰ (Figure 9).

Such representations of Hell are referred to as “Hellmouth” and are meant to represent the whale in the tale of Jonah. The whale expels Jonah from its mouth¹¹, and hence the mouth shape.

The MRI icons (Figures 1-3, 10) have other Russian ‘cousins’ from the same period with similar representations of Hell. Their shared features include a geometrical shape for the walls of Paradise, rather than the more typical straight wall with church buildings in front of it; a narration of the ascent of the Good Thief, Saint Dismas, into Paradise; a demon with a long tongue; and other iconographical similarities. These suggest similarity of temporal and regional commonality as with two icons from the Yaroslavl Museum.



Figure 9. Miniature of *The Last Judgment*

6 Rossi, Corina. *The Treasures of the Monastery of Saint Catherine*. Vercelli, Italy: White Star Publishers, 2006. P. 107.

7 Matakieva-Lilkova, Teofana. *Icons in Bulgaria*. Sofia: Borina Publishing House, 1994. P. 152.

8 *Coptic icons, Part I*. Cairo: Lehrert and Landroch, 1998. P. 94.

9 We are focusing solely on the representation of Hell in this paper. We will be studying the remaining demons in this icon in future studies.

10 From the Last Judgment scene (29) in *The Très Riches Heures of Jean, Duke of Berry* New York: George Braziller, 1969, n.p.

11 Matthew 12:40.



Figure 10. Resurrection and Descent into Hell. MRI #2011.90. See Figure 1 for Hellhead detail.



(left to right): Figure 11.
Yaroslavl. Third quarter of
the 16th century. Figure 12.
Yaroslavl. Late 16th century.
Figure 13. Vladimir-Suzdal.



Figure 11a. Detail of Hellhead



Figure 12a. Detail of Hellhead

The first¹² (Figure 11) is dated from the third quarter of the 16th century. Notice the very similar iconography to MRI #2011.90 (Figure 10)—but without the opening in its head (Figure 11a)—and it has the geometrical representation of Paradise, a demon with long tongue, and other attributes. Similarly, the second (Figure 12), also from Yaroslavl, has this creature (Figure 12a), but with the additional two participants of the ‘trinity of the damned,’¹³ that is, it holds the devil who, in turn, holds Judas on his lap.

And, still another one, from a museum in Vladimir-Suzdal¹⁴ has the ‘trinity of the damned’ with *kleyma* (Figure 13). As mentioned earlier, contrary to previous representations of the *Resurrection and Descent into Hell*, the MRI icons (Figure 1-3, 8) and icons in Figures 11-13, among others, establish a new icon type depicting another portion of the apocryphal Gospel of Nicodemus on which it is based, namely the rising of the good thief into Paradise. So the narrative structure of this icon consists of two streams, both, appropriately, upward towards Paradise. One stream is of Christ’s descent and rising and his raising of the righteous. The other is of the good thief’s journey rising toward and into Paradise.¹⁵

Hellhead

With this as background information, our focus is the portrayal of Hell in this new icon type. Hell is portrayed in two ways in these icons. Firstly, as a large black, seemingly

12 Yaroslavl Icons of the 13th mid-17th century, Vol. I, Moscow: Северный Паломник, 2009, p.357.

13 A term coined by Dmitriy Antonov (personal communication).

14 *Ikony Vladimira i Suzdalia* [Icons of Vladimir and Suzdal’], ed. M. A. Bykova. Moscow: Severnyi palomnik, 2006, p.247.

15 Descent and Resurrection icons describe both the rising of Christ as well as the rising of the righteous and that is why they are called ‘Anastasis’ icons in Greek, that is ‘rising’ icons. See Anna D. Kartsonis’ seminal work *Anastasis-The Making of an Image*. Princeton, NJ; Princeton University Press, 1986.

empty cave, and secondly, it is ‘personified’ as a red creature, looking like a human in many ways but with two or more eyes and an opening in its head out of which the righteous arise. We have called this creature “Hellhead.”¹⁶

The question naturally arises of why are there two representations of Hell in these icons? The representation of Hell as a dark cavern is traditional and is based on biblical texts.¹⁷ But in this type of icon there is also the necessity for a representation of Hell as a human-like creature. The reason for this is that descriptive details of the descent into Hell originate from the apocryphal Gospel of Nicodemus. And, in that gospel Hell speaks a great deal, describing the descent, and so this creature needs an orifice for releasing and expelling the righteous as well as a mouth for simultaneously speaking (Figure 1).

Of particular interest in the features of this ‘personified’ Hell are:

- It is represented twice—once as a dark cavern and once as a creature,
- Contrary to traditional iconography, the “personified” Hell is depicted *en face* as compared to the usual practice of representing evil beings in profile,
- It is red as fire,
- It is portrayed as serene (accepting?),
- It has multiple eyes,
- The righteous are exiting it via an open mouth on top of its head (similar to the shape of the typical Leviathan of Hellmouths), even though it has a normal human mouth below its nose.



Figure 14. One of the marvels of India

Now, how do we know that this figure represents Hell? First, the righteous, in white clothing, are ascending from it and it holds a chain with which it has ensnared the Devil, an event spoken of in the canonical texts.¹⁸ Second, Antonov and Mayzul’s have reproduced an image from a manuscript which shows a Hellmouth and it is actually labeled Адъ, that is, Hell.¹⁹

But what is the source of Hellhead? Clearly it is not the typical whale mouth in profile. Could it be the image of one of the 21 marvels of India (Figure 14)?²⁰

16 Notice that in the second Yaroslavl and Vladimir-Suzdal icons the ‘trinity of the damned’ is the larger iconographic unit—Hellhead has the devil sitting on its lap, and the devil holds Judas on his lap.

17 2 Peter 2:4.

18 Revelation 20:2.

19 Antonov and Mayzul’s, op. cit. p.235.

20 Schedel’s *Nuremberg Chronicle* of 1493. For a concise survey of the history of early texts on monsters, and, therefore, a brief history of teratology see Wittkower, Rudolf, “Marvels of the East. A Study in the History of Monsters,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, Vol. 5 (1942) pp. 159-197. For more recent studies see Mittman, Asa Simon and Peter J. Dendle, eds., *The Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous*, Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, Co., 2012.

Figure 15. A medieval image of Alexander encountering Blemmyes



Mythological headless creatures of this sort are called Blemmyes.²¹ Mythical Blemmyes, however, occur in many western illustrated manuscripts including those of Herodotus and Pliny the Elder (1st century CE).²² In particular they appear in illustrated manuscript copies of a popular Western and Eastern medieval fantastical novel about the life of Alexander the Great. For example, a medieval mss of this novel has the illustration shown in Figure 15.²³

These illustrations are important to our argument because they occur in copies of this novel that were translated into Slavic, probably, firstly, in Serbian. This novel was written in the 4th century by the so-called Pseudo-Callisthenes.²⁴ It was translated into many languages including Serbian, many manuscripts of which appeared from 1200 CE onward. The Serbian version of this novel is called *Српска Александрида*.²⁵ And, importantly, according to a list of holdings in the Kirillov-Belozerskiy monastery in Russia compiled by the monk Efrosin in the 15th century, the monastery had a copy of this novel recorded as “Serpskaya Aleksandrida.”²⁶

21 Blemmyes were an actual nomadic tribe that lived between the Nile and the Red Sea at the latitude of the First Cataract of the Nile. They are important to medieval history of Christianity in the Arabic peninsula because they often fought against the Romans and often attacked and killed Christian monks in that area. See Robert Timothy Updegraff *A Study of the Blemmyes* Brandeis University, PhD dissertation, 1978.

22 See Wittkower, op.cit.

23 From the British Library manuscript Harvey 4979 f72v. http://picasaweb.google.com/lh/photo/Ds6JAM8XfBKZ31_qaINUB1ucagw8raYNq8khWN9DlvM. For other representations of Blemmyes see also Mittman, Asa Simon, “Headless men and hungry monsters,” Stanford University Alumni Center: The Sarum Seminar, March, 2003. For an earlier study focusing on illustrations in the various Alexander novels see Ross, D.J.A. *Alexander Historiatus: A Guide to Medieval Illustrated Alexander Literature*. London: The Warburg Institute, 1963.

24 The real Callisthenes was Alexander the Great’s biographer who recorded his exploits throughout his campaigns.

25 Маринковић, Ралмила, *Српска Александрида*. Београд, 1969.

26 Ботвинник, М. Н., Я. С. Лурье и О. В. Творогов *Александрида--Роман об Александре Македонском по русской рукописи XV века*. Москва Наука 1966 [*Aleksandriya—Roman ob Aleksandre Makedonskom po russkoi rukopisi XV veka. The Alexandria—A novel of Alexander the Great according to a manuscript of the 15th c*. Moscow: Nauka, 1966.]



Figure 16. Headless men from an illustration in *Aleksandriya*


In this book Pseudo-Callisthenes records Alexander encountering many different fantastic creatures while on his conquests in the East. These include centaurs, amazons, humans with dog heads, other humans with six hands and six feet, some with only one foot, etc. And in the published mss *Aleksandriya*²⁷ there is an illustration of headless men from a 17th century copy of the book between pages 40 and 41 (Figure 14).

These are headless creatures with an opening on the top of their heads.²⁸ But their eyes, noses, and mouths are located on their chests like the Hell figure in our icons. Based on this representation of Hell as having a head from which the righteous rise from the mouth in the top of its head and the fact that representations of headless creatures similar to Hellhead existed in a much copied novel²⁹ known in Russia, we feel that it is this fanciful representation of Blemmyes in the Alexander novel that was the source for Hellhead.³⁰

27 Botvinnik, et al., op. cit.

28 They could be crowns but the top of the crowns also look very much like teeth.

29 According to Marinkovich, op. cit. p. 337, more than 350 mss. of the *Aleksandriya* exist.

30  In the mid-17th century, demonization of the tsar and Patriarch Nikon by Old Believers resulted in the two of them being represented as demons in folk art images. Whether any of the Hellheads pictured here are similar to representations of known political or religious figures of the period remains to be examined. Please note the partial similarity of this picture with the image of Hellhead in Figure 1. The relationship between the Old Believer art and Hellhead will be explored in future research.

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